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SUBJECT: INSIDE THE SAUSAGE FACTORY - A VISIT TO THE BABIL PROVINCIAL COUNCIL

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary and comment: The Babil Provincial Council (PC) meeting on May 29 provided an object lesson on the status of representative governance in the province. While a handful of voices spoke out about things on citizens' minds, such as power shortages and long lines at gas stations, substantive business mostly languished under extraneous detail, lack of parliamentary procedure and personalization of issues. Still, the vibrant, slightly chaotic discussion left no doubt that democracy is setting down roots and its practitioners grappling - even unconsciously - with fundamental principles of governance. End comment and summary.

¶2. (SBU) PRT team leader and IPAO attended the first two hours of the Babil PC meeting on May 29. After convening on time with approximately two-thirds of its 40 members present (a few more trickled in late), the council dispensed with a few routine items of business involving charitable donations. Discussion then turned to a less altruistic subject, the purchase of vehicles for PC members. Though the head of the Analysis Committee stated that the matter was being studied, council members put forward their own proposals on whether to buy from the local market, how long tenders should be advertised and what to do about high repair costs of vehicles they already have. The debate was inconclusive, with the chair simply saying at the end that he would look into the matter.

¶3. (SBU) The chairman, Engineer Mohammed Ali Al-Masoudi, next introduced a letter from the Supreme Reconstruction Council in Baghdad asking the province to propose five projects, each worth 20 billion Iraqi dinars (approx. USD 15 million), for funding. Over the objections of the Planning and Projects Committee chairs, who pointed out that their committees had not yet been consulted, the floor was thrown open for debate. Several ideas emerged; one member voiced a widespread popular concern by pleading that electrical projects be given top priority. The group eventually agreed that any nominations would need to have comprehensive plans attached and be selected according to priorities. The PC chair asked committee heads to meet the next day to discuss the subject and then to consult with local councils in the province to develop a list of needs in the service and health sectors.

¶4. (SBU) The morning's longest two discussions dealt with whether to make PC sessions available to citizens on CD-ROM (and open to direct TV coverage) and whether to change the name of the province from "Babil" to "Hillah." Sandwiched in between and taken up again later was the first actual agenda item, a cut

in the fuel allocation to bakeries. At various points during the nearly hour-long CD debate, different members pointed out that they were concerning themselves with "silly" issues rather than important ones like the lines of cars snaking across the city waiting to buy gas. Such an observation would sometimes silence the group for a few moments before someone picked up the thread of the frequently raucous discussion again. Ultimately the name-change issue was set aside for consideration in the future and the PC chair authorized the Media Committee chairman to make CDs of council meetings available to citizens upon request.

¶5. (C) The chairman asserted himself from time to time, raising his voice over other speakers and reminding them of their obligation to serve the people. Wielding an oversized gavel, he occasionally threatened to expel those who refused to yield the floor. For the most part, however, he slumped back in his chair and allowed near-chaos to reign, with two and three members trying to talk at the same time and no organized system for recognizing someone to speak. More than once he melodramatically made as if to leave, proclaiming that he would simply quit if not accorded the respect he deserved. In a brief meeting in his office as PRT officers were on their way out, he smiled sadly and murmured an implicit apology for his colleagues' lack of decorum.

¶6. (C) Comment: The two hours of debate we observed yielded few concrete outcomes and unfortunately did not take up the subject of budget execution and oversight, the importance of which PRT team leader had reiterated a few days earlier to the PC chair, his deputy and the deputy governor. In one sense the undisciplined session summed up the main reasons for Babil's mediocre performance in spending its money and implementing projects over the past year. Pared down to its core, however, the meeting in fact dealt with some of the fundamental topics a representative body must concern itself with: transparency, prioritizing resource allocations and responsiveness to the public. The passionate, raw exchanges may have generated more

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heat than light today, but offered indubitable proof that democracy is taking root in Babil.
HUNTER